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Psychological Health and Spiritual Maturity

A Parallel Journey

by June Breninger

I first started thinking seriously about the relationship between psychological health and spiritual maturity after reading Scott Peck's book **The Road Less Traveled**. He focuses on ways in which the journey toward psychological health runs parallel with the journey toward spiritual maturity. In his recent book **Further Along The Road Less Traveled**, Peck continued the discussion of the relationship between psychological health and spiritual maturity by saying that health, wholeness, and holiness are derived from the same root word. "Salvation" meaning healing comes from the same word as "salve" and refers to the process of becoming whole. He says that we go through the same stages in the same order anytime we make any significant step toward psychological health or spiritual growth.

Thinking about this relationship brings up three questions: Is it possible for a person to be psychologically healthy and not spiritually mature? Or, is it possible to be spiritually mature and not psychologically healthy? If these journeys are so closely related as to be almost indistinguishable, are there ways in which our knowledge about mental health could help us in our spiritual development?

For example, the ability to deal with anger is an issue that relates both to psychological health and spiritual maturity. Unresolved anger robs us of inner peace and may contribute to physical health problems. It is also a spiritual problem as the apostle Paul attests to the Ephesians when he states, "in your anger, do not sin" and "don't let the sun go down on your wrath." He seems to assume that anger is a

part of the human condition and urges his readers to work toward resolving anger as quickly as possible.

Rather than trying to define psychological health and spiritual maturity, let's focus on some of the characteristics of psychological health and its implications in terms of spiritual maturity. Psychologist Abraham Maslow spent years studying people whom he considered to be psychologically healthy. Some of his subjects were historical figures like Abraham Lincoln, Albert Schweitzer, and Eleanor Roosevelt whose writings and biographies he read. Other subjects were contemporaries whom he observed and interviewed. He concluded his research with a list of characteristics of these "self-actualized" people who were being what they could be, becoming what they could become and living up to the growth orientation that he assumed motivates us all.

Maslow found these psychologically healthy people to be:

1) **Oriented toward reality**. They have a more accurate perception of reality and they are more willing to face reality in day-to-day situations. Maslow's "orientation toward reality" is consistent with Peck's views in **The Road Less Traveled**. Peck says that "Mental health is an ongoing process of dedication to reality at all costs," . . . that is to say that we must always hold truth, as best we can determine it, to be more important, more vital to our self-interest, than our comfort. Conversely, we must always consider our personal discomfort relatively unimportant and, indeed, even welcome it in the service of the search for truth" (51). This dedication

to truth means a life of continuous, stringent self-examination, a life of willingness to be personally challenged and a life of total honesty. Peck says on the other hand that one of the roots of mental illness is invariably an interlocking system of lies we have been told and lies we have told ourselves.

The spiritual implication of this orientation toward reality can be seen in Jesus' words, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). Knowing truth and following truth are at the heart of spiritual maturity. The Christian journey is a continued search for truth, rather than a destination of *the* truth. Truth calls us to continuous, stringent self-examination and to a willingness to be personally challenged, although truth may make us miserable in the process of setting us free. Jesus, who came in grace and truth, helps us confront harsh realities about ourselves, and we do so by his grace.

2) Accepting of self and others. Our self-concept has to do with what we think or believe about ourselves; self-image would be a synonym for self-concept. Self-esteem has to do with how we feel about ourselves; self-acceptance would be a synonym for self-esteem. In addition to being more accepting of self, the psychologically healthy person is more accepting of others. Therefore, one's ability to love self affects the degree he/she is capable of loving others. We could infer from the command to "love your neighbor as you love yourself" that the more healthy one's love of self is the more capable he/she is of loving others.

Furthermore, love of self, love of others and love of God are all interconnected. We usually learn how to love ourselves by observing how others love us. Children growing up in caring, nurturing families where their needs are met usually come to believe and feel that they are loved and worthwhile. Most often our belief that God loves us comes from the words and actions of significant others. It also proves true that loving God and accepting his love can propel us toward a healthy love of self and others. John addresses the connection between loving God and loving others with the statement "For anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20). To the *shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4, Jesus joined the commandment of Leviticus 19:18, "Love your neighbor as yourself" to show that love for others is a logical outgrowth of love for God (Matt 20:30-31).

An implication for spiritual maturity is that when we feel accepted and worthwhile, we are freer from being so preoccupied with self. Any kind of pain, whether physical or psychological, can turn inward. With a roaring headache, we tend to become less interested in outside events and the needs of other

people. When the pain is psychological, such as feelings of inadequacy, we become self-absorbed and self-conscious.

Likewise, denial attempts to get us off balance by either thinking too lowly or too highly of ourselves. If we "denialize" ourselves, we minimize our abilities and the spiritual gifts we have been given, and if we focus on our guilt and inadequacy we may neglect the good works for which we have been created. If we think "more highly of ourselves than we ought" (Rom 12:3) we are vulnerable to sins of pride. Paul calls us to a realistic assessment of ourselves. When we are oriented in reality we can come to a place where we accept ourselves and believe that, with God's help, we are adequate.

Gideon is an excellent model for those of us who tend to feel inadequate and inferior. Judges 6 and 7 tells the story of this man who felt anything but adequate and the great victory that God accomplished through him. The backdrop of the story is that the Israelites were a defeated people. For seven years the Midianites and their allies had invaded the land to ravage it and were camped in the nearby valley with an army of 200,000. Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress, because he was afraid of the enemy, when the angel appeared to him. The angel called Gideon a "mighty warrior" and informed him that he would deliver God's people. Gideon did not feel like a mighty warrior and presented the argument that he couldn't possibly accomplish the task because he was from the weakest clan in Manasseh and was the least significant in his family. He managed to raise an army of 32,000 to fight the enemy. God thought this number was too great and sent all soldiers home who were afraid. An army of 10,000 remained. The number was further reduced to 300, and the Midianite army of 200,000 was defeated. What a victory God accomplished through Gideon! Gideon did not feel adequate, and in reality was not adequate for the task. Is it not exciting to think that the God of history and of the present uses inadequate people to accomplish his purposes? The challenge for us, as it was for Gideon, is to realistically assess our fears and feelings of inadequacy and at the same time allow ourselves to be tools by which God can accomplish his purposes in this world.

3) Problem-centered rather than self-centered. Psychologically healthy people are able to remove themselves from center stage and to look beyond themselves to the great tasks that need to be accomplished. Our baggage from the past keeps us ego-centered and self-absorbed. The best rationale I have heard for getting issues from the past resolved came from a young man who had grown up with an alcoholic mother, but participated in a therapy group

on a Christian college campus. In a testimonial in chapel he explained to his fellow students that he was participating in the group because he wanted to get rid of his baggage from the past so that he could bear the cross of Christ.

John the Baptist is an excellent example of someone who was problem-centered rather than self-centered. He had a clear sense of his mission; his task was to point people to the Lamb of God rather than to draw disciples to himself. He knew that his ministry was successful when the multitudes stopped following him and started following Christ.

4) *Involved in a calling.* Maslow says that those psychologically healthy people are involved in some work or project greater than themselves; they are "involved in a calling, like in the religious sense."

A sense of purpose for one's existence often comes through pursuing a calling. In his book, **The Will to Meaning**, Victor Frankl explains that there is no prescribed purpose for our existence, we have to be creative and work at finding the meaning and purpose for our own existence. The previous examples of John the Baptist and Gideon illustrate the sense of calling in an individual's life. The challenge for Christians is to understand what our spiritual gifts are, to identify our abilities and talents and to be open to the leading of the Spirit so that a calling can be lived out and the good works for which we have been created are accomplished.

5) *Capable of close interpersonal relationships and capable of increased identification with humanity.* Psychologically healthy people are able to live in successful intimate relationships with family and close friends and at the same time feel a connection with persons whom they don't know personally but who may be suffering from hunger, discrimination or injustice. They, like the Good Samaritan in Luke 10, understand the concept of neighbor.

Likewise, an important barometer of our spiritual maturity is our capacity and willingness for loving others. Love of neighbor is not only a command of Jesus, it is the characteristic mentioned first in Paul's list of fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5.

Peck defines love as "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth" (81). This definition points to the interrelationship between self-love and love of others; he says that ultimately they are indistinguishable. He describes love as an act of will, both an intention and an action. Love involves extending one's self by taking an extra step or walking an extra mile. Peck states that,

... we do so in opposition to the inertia of laziness or the resistance of fear. ... The

principal form that the work of love takes is attention. When we love another we give him or her our attention; we attend to that person's growth. When we love ourselves we attend to our own growth (120).

Spiritually mature people live a life of love, and they love not just with words but with actions and in truth (1 John. 3:18). They are described in Matthew 25:31-46 as feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, showing hospitality to strangers, clothing the needy, looking after the sick and visiting in prisons. They are capable of identifying with humanity. In so doing they are expressing love to Jesus by their actions, and they are serving others in a self-forgetful way.

Implications

If the journey toward spiritual maturity runs parallel with the journey toward psychological health, then some practical implications need to be considered.

- Professionally trained counselors who are spiritually mature Christians could fill a vital role in the church as part of a full-time ministry team. Helping members of the congregation address abuse issues, addictions, problems in relationships, and other issues could help in freeing Christians from some baggage so that they can more successfully bear the cross of Christ.

- There is need for seminars and classes for children, parents, and Bible class teachers that focus on self-concept. Helping people develop a healthy self-love and teaching parents and teachers to foster self-acceptance in others can be a step toward loving and accepting others.

- Providing mediation and conflict resolution approaches for addressing problems in marriages and in church disputes. Leaders and members of the congregation could be trained in conflict resolution so that biblical principles would be followed in resolving differences among Christians.

- Mental health topics such as depression could be addressed in classes or seminars so that Christians could be more supportive of fellow Christians who battle this disorder.

- Support groups could be encouraged within the congregation for members who are dealing with such as addiction, grief, depression, single parenting and divorce recovery.

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